



Persistence and Vision Turns Wasted Land into a TREASURE

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Three ponds have been constructed on the property and are stocked with bass.

WHEN BOB MATHEWS began talking to his wife Leta about buying a tract of forestland in Colbert County, she was reluctant. “I was never against it, I just thought we couldn’t afford it because we had only been here a short time. We had young children, had just bought a home and were in the process of setting up a medical practice.”

She agreed to visit the property, however, and recalls the first time Bob took her out to see it. There was a huge mud puddle near the entrance, so large they

couldn’t get a pickup truck through it. They had to walk along rutted roads and across land thick with old logging debris.

The land had been idle since a timber harvest four years earlier, and the result was rough, raw land. Yet, she too was captivated by the promise it held. “Once he brought me to see it, I could see how beautiful it was and I wanted it too,” she said.

The young couple’s ability in 1976 to envision what the property could become with a lot of hard work resulted in one of Alabama’s most impressive TREASURE

Forests and the 1999 Helene Mosley Winner for the Northwest Region.

Getting Started

One of the first steps Bob made was to contact then county manager Tommy Patterson for assistance. They worked together to draw up a management plan with primary objectives of timber production and recreation, and secondary objectives of wildlife, erosion control and aesthetics. Tommy also helped them sign up for cost-share assistance through the WRAP program in 1977.



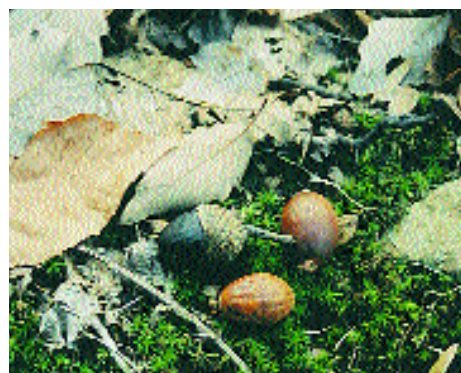
Bob and Leta Mathews enjoy a walk.



The Mathews transformed idle land into a picturesque, productive TREASURE Forest.



Indian blanket is one of the many kinds of wildflowers found on the property.



Mast-producing hardwoods provide food for wildlife.

In the fall of 1977, Bob signed up for FIP cost-share to establish a 73-acre pine plantation. After looking at another plan prepared by the Soil Conservation Service, he decided to scale back the pine plantation to 49 acres and devote the remaining 24 acres to wildlife food plots, green fields, a small pond and a fruit orchard.

They plowed firelanes around the 49 acres and used a prescribed burn to site prep the area before planting loblolly pine in the fall of 1977. A severe winter storm in early 1978 killed more than 80

percent of the seedlings. Undaunted, he applied for additional cost-share and replanted in 1979.

Some years later, Virginia pines and scrub oaks in another area were cleared with a shear blade and replanted in pine. Unfortunately, another severe ice storm in the mid 1990s crashed it all to the ground. Bob recalls they had more than 90 trees on the roads that had to be cleared and 60 loads of debris to be hauled off. So, again, they cut, burned and replanted.

Becoming a TREASURE Forest

"I saw an article in the local paper about TREASURE Forest and got in touch with the local Forestry Commission office," Bob said. "They helped me get started in the program and I was certified in 1979." The Mathews were pioneers in the program with TREASURE Forest #72.

They took the initial 232 acres of cutover land and converted it into productive woodland managed for timber production, recreation, wildlife and aesthetics, while keeping most of it as natural as possible.

Today the tract is 412 acres and all areas are well stocked with a diversity of irregularly shaped stands of loblolly pine, bottomland hardwood and an upland hardwood/pine mix. Hardwood tracts are scheduled for harvest to provide different age classes of timber. Den trees and selected mast-producing trees are excluded from cutting.

The rutted log road impassable in 1976 is now part of an excellent road system. Early on they spent about \$5,000 to \$7,000 annually on nothing but gravel and regrading of roads throughout the tract. Today a network of wood roads in chert or gravel, and culverts and water turnouts—critical on steep terrain—have been added.

The scenic, winding driveway to the cabin is almost a mile long. When they first bought the property, it initially took 52 loads of gravel just to get it into shape. Now they have paved the drive and riprapped the ditches. They are adding another chert road so they can travel the whole place without unlocking a gate.

Wildlife Habitat Enhancement

The North Alabama terrain is hilly but that has not impeded the Mathews' efforts

to provide substantial wildlife habitat enhancement. "We have green plots, food plots, autumn olive and other berry-producing trees for quail, turkey and other species," Bob notes. "We've seen deer, bobcat, rabbits, doves and songbirds. Also, big black cats. This isn't hearsay, we've really seen big cats."

In addition to mast-producing hardwoods, Bob and Leta have developed a fruit orchard with apple, peach, pear, persimmon, pecan, hazelnuts, walnuts and filbert trees. Plots of bicolor lespedeza and sawtooth oak have also been planted, and firebreaks are planted in wildlife foods.

They also cleaned up an old farm site and set aside 15 acres to plant in trees not indigenous to Alabama or that are no longer common here. There are chinquapins, different types of hickories and a monkey puzzle tree from Chile as well as others. A small grove of beech trees along Cane Creek is also preserved. Three ponds have been constructed around the property and are stocked with Florida bass. Solar feeders keep them fed and provide great entertainment for guests.

The welcome you receive as a guest of Bob and Leta Mathews is genuine. They like to bring children who have never really been in the woods to see their first wild animals or catch their first fish. Leta says one of their favorite things to do is invite young children out and tell them they are going to turn out all the lights for a little while. The children are always amazed at how dark it is and how bright the moon and stars are.

Getting Assistance

Bob and Leta do the major portion of the work on their property. Two of Bob's friends enjoy working around the place and neighbors that have lived on the mountain for years help, too. "For big projects, I call on the Forestry Commission," said Bob. "If I were going to give a forest landowner one piece of advice, it would be to contact the Forestry Commission. They've been very helpful over the years. Wayne Winsted, Johnnie Everitt and others have really helped me. Also, you need to read a lot and learn about forest management for yourself."

Future Plans

The family is developing an extensive

walking trail with tree identification signs behind the lake and up toward the bluff. They are also continuing all projects for planting, fencing, lake management and maintenance of existing stands.

Bob and Leta are very fortunate to have children that enjoy the land as much as they do. Although both children are very busy with school and careers, they love to visit the property when their schedules allow.

Their son, David, recently graduated from the University of North Alabama with studies in history and economics. Brian graduated from the University of South Alabama Medical School in May and is beginning a residency in internal medicine. His wife Scarlet is a physical therapist.

"Our sons have the same commitment we do," Bob says. "We feel they will want to hold on to this property and continue as TREASURE Forest landowners. There will be definitely be two generations, and hopefully beyond that."

The promise of productive, scenic forestland has been fulfilled on Hawk Pride Mountain under the careful hands of Bob and Leta Mathews. The hard-scrabble land they bought in 1976 has bloomed into a picturesque gem of healthy, productive forestland filled with the sights and sounds of the best Alabama forests have to offer.



UPDATE

The TREASURE Forest Program has set a goal of having 2 million acres in the program by the end of the year 2000. The chart below shows the number of acres currently enrolled in the program.

